

Field Report

Assateague Island National Seashore

■ 1.0 Summary

Assateague Island National Seashore is located on a 37-mile-long Atlantic coastal barrier island in the States of Maryland and Virginia. Three agencies share responsibility for the management of the island: the NPS for Assateague National Seashore, the USFWS for the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources for Assateague State Park. For a more complete understanding of the situation, this report should be reviewed in concert with the companion document for the Chincoteague NWR.

An Atlantic Ocean barrier island, Assateague is very active from a geological perspective, is constantly being reshaped by the natural forces of wind and water. The island combines both near wilderness areas in its central portions with public recreational beaches in the vicinity of the NPS Visitor Centers at the north and south ends of the island. Vehicular access to the National Seashore is limited to a single, two-lane bridge connecting Maryland Route 611 at the Barrier Island Visitor Center to the island proper across Sinepuxent Bay. A similar situation exists at the south end of the island, where a two-lane bridge on Virginia Route 175 connects the mainline to the Chincoteague NWR through the Town of Chincoteague.

The majority of visitation to the National Seashore consists of overnight campers. The use of a mandatory campground reservation system serves as a control on visitation levels. During occasional summer holiday periods, the parking areas along the oceanfront are filled to capacity by day-use visitors.

Preservation of the island's natural features and its resident wildlife is a major objective of both the NPS and the USFWS. As a means of reducing traffic congestion on the island, the NPS and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources have proposed a relocation of their separate entrance stations to the mainline side of the bay adjacent to the Barrier Island Visitor Center.

Potential Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) needs have been identified for this site as follows:

- An expansion of the existing express bus service linking the National Seashore and State Park campgrounds with the Ocean City Transit Center/Bus Terminal. The current service level of three round-trips per day could be increased both in terms of duration of the service day and frequency. For example, departures from the National Seashore could be offered later than 5:00 p.m. and service frequency could be improved from the current level of once every two hours to once every hour. In

addition, an expanded public information program to make Seashore visitors, especially overnight campers, aware of the existence of this service appears to be needed.

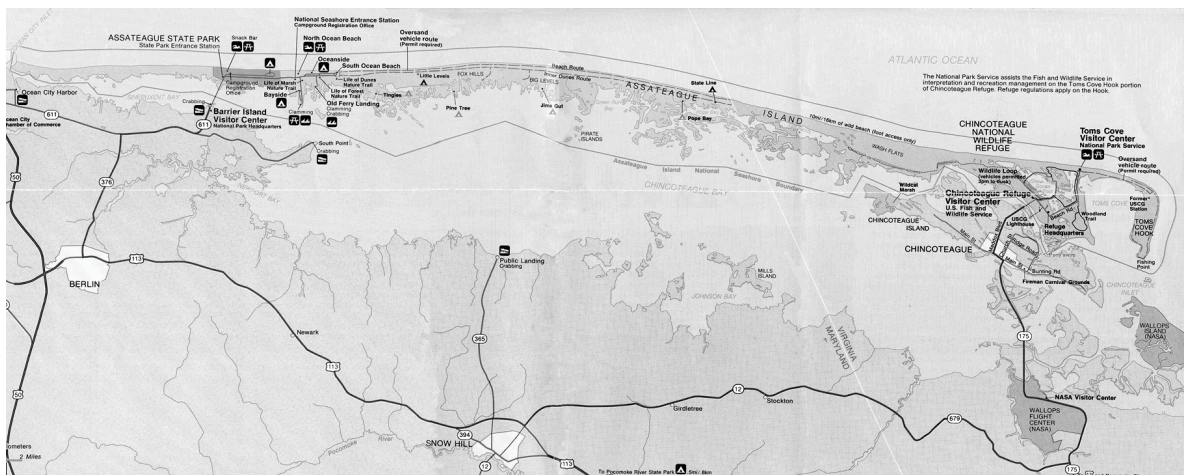
- During periods of high day-use visitation, a shuttle bus or tram route could be operated from the Barrier Island Visitor Center to the beachfront. The potential initiation of such a service should be delayed until such time as the combined National Seashore/State Park Visitor Station has been relocated to Route 611 in the area of the Barrier Island Visitor Center.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

Assateague Island National Seashore is located on a 37-mile-long barrier island along the Atlantic Coastal areas of Maryland and Virginia. The island begins just south of Ocean City, Maryland and ends at Chincoteague, Virginia. These two communities represent the gateway communities for, respectively, the Assateague Island National Seashore and the Chincoteague NWR. Figure 1 illustrates all of Assateague Island, while Figure 2 presents an expanded view of the north end of the island.

Figure 1. Assateague Island



2.2 Administration and Classification

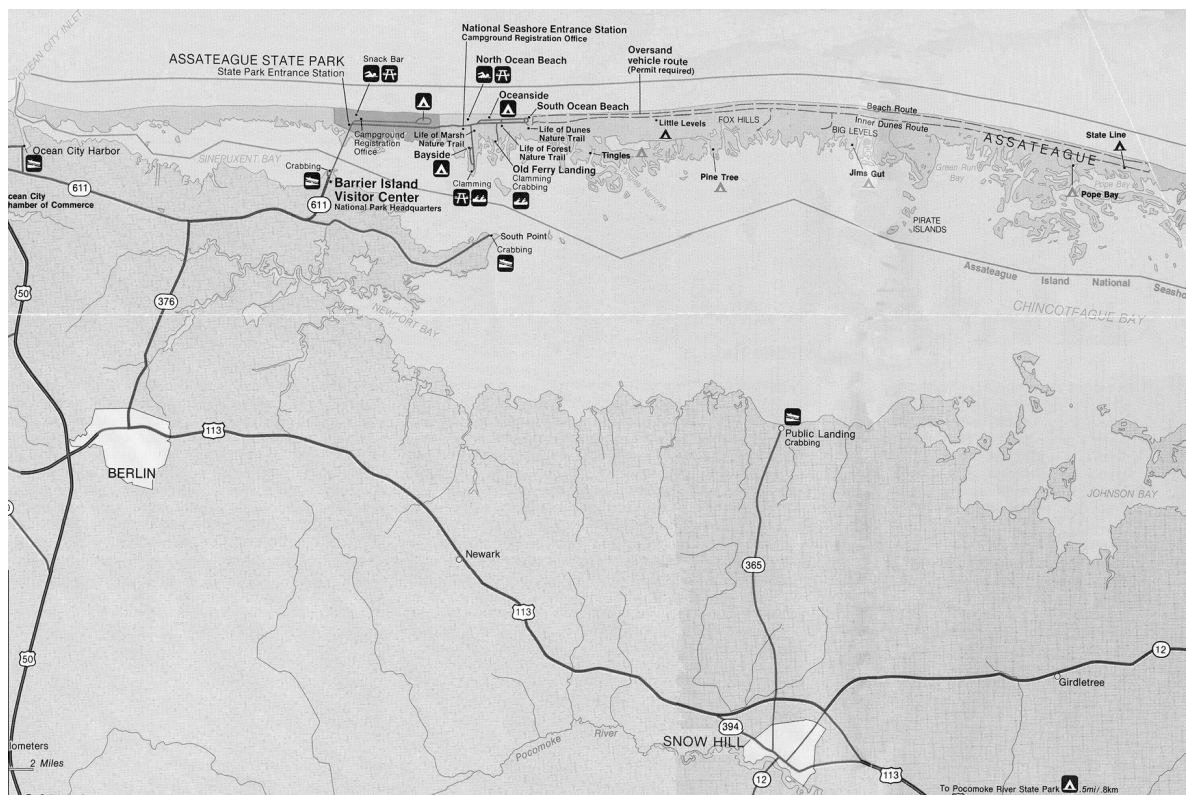
The administration of the over 18,000 acre Assateague Island is shared by three agencies. The NPS for the National Seashore; the USFWS for the Chincoteague NWR; and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources for Assateague State Park.

2.3 Physical Description

Assateague Island is a classic Atlantic coastal barrier island, and consists of a combination of ocean beaches, sand dunes, forests, marsh, and bay areas. The island is approximately 37 miles long, and varies in width from less than one-quarter mile at the north end to approximately two miles at the south end. The total size of the National Seashore is approximately 39,722 acres, of which only about 16,000 acres are dry land, the remainder being marsh or open waters.

The NPS operates two Visitor Centers on the island. The Barrier Island Visitor Center at the Maryland (north) end includes a variety of exhibits, an aquarium, maps and publications on the region (Figure 2). The Toms Cove Visitor Center on the Virginia (south) end of the island offers exhibits, maps, and publications. The Chincoteague NWR Visitor Center is also located on the Virginia end of the island.

Figure 2. Developed Area – Assateague Island



The central portion of the island spanning the Maryland/Virginia state line is a restricted area, with access available only to authorized off-road vehicles (from the north) or foot access. In addition to traditional day-use oceanside recreational activities, there are a number of campsites provided on the north end of the island in both the NPS and Maryland Department of Natural Resources administered areas.

Access to the National Seashore and Assateague State Park is provided by a single two-lane bridge on Maryland Route 611. This connects the island proper with the mainland. An adjacent bicycle/pedestrian bridge was recently opened to connect the mainland with the island.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Seashore

The Chincoteague NWR was originally established by Congress in 1943 to provide habitat and protection for migrating birds. In September of 1965, the Assateague Island National Seashore was established as a unit of the NPS. The National Seashore can thus be viewed as an overlay on the original wildlife refuge area. The Seashore thus has a more active recreational and educational mission than does the associated refuge area.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The total estimated number of annual visitors to the entire island is approximately 2.3 million per year. Of this total, approximately 1.4 million are visitors to the Chincoteague NWR area on the south end of the island. Visitation is highest between Memorial Day and Labor Day, and lowest in the period from December to March. The vast majority of visitors are residents of the mid-Atlantic states with the highest concentrations coming from the Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia area.

It is estimated that approximately one-quarter of the annual visitors to the National Seashore area are day-trip, beach recreational users, with the remainder being overnight campers. Approximately 6,000 off-road permits are sold each year (\$65 each) to allow access to the 12-mile central portion of the island. A maximum of 145 vehicles are allowed into this area at any one time.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The existing parking areas on the island are reported to be generally adequate to accommodate peak visitation demands. It is reported by the NPS staff that beach access is closed no more than six to eight days per year, primarily during major summer holiday periods. Access to the National Seashore camping areas is strictly controlled by reservation. Thus, no problems have been reported in terms of access to these facilities.

In an effort to better manage vehicular access to the island and reduce associated peak period traffic congestion, the NPS and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources plan to relocate their current separate island side entrance stations to the mainline side of Sinepuxent Bay. This new consolidated entry point would be located adjacent to the existing NPS Barrier Island Visitor Center. This would provide an opportunity for the

provision of an expanded fringe area parking lot with a potential ATS linkage to the beachfront area for day users. Alternatively, day-use visitors could continue to access the island via the recently completed pedestrian/bicycle bridge.

In the summer of 1998, Wicomico County, Maryland, in association with the Town of Ocean City, Maryland initiated a midday and evening express bus service to link the National Seashore and Assateague State Park camping areas with downtown Ocean City. This service operates three round-trips per day. Departures from the National Seashore take place at 1:00 p.m., 3:00 p.m., and 5:10 p.m., with departures from the Ocean City Transit Center at 3:55 p.m., 7:00 p.m., and 9:00 p.m. Users purchase a \$2.00 round-trip fare at the time of boarding. Exact change is required and no return trips are provided without a ticket. This service is operated daily between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Ridership during the first year of service in 1998 averaged three to five passengers per day. During the summer of 1999, average ridership per day increased to between five to 10 passengers per day. Occasionally, the 15-passenger vehicle used for this service has been close to capacity on evening return trips from Ocean City to the campgrounds. Increased publicity would appear to have the potential to substantially increase the utilization of this service.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Superintendent of Assateague National Seashore is a strong proponent of sustainable development and eco-tourism. These objectives are shared by many of the communities along the west side of Chincoteague Bay. The view held by many residents in the area of the Towns of Berlin and Snow Hill is that they do not desire their communities to become extensions of Ocean City. Indeed, the typical visitor to Assateague National Seashore is seeking a more low-keyed, natural environment experience than visitors to the heavily developed, resort orientation of Ocean City.

This desire for controlled development on the western side of the bay would seem to lend itself to the use of ATS services. For example, an expansion of the current transit service between Ocean City and the seashore could allow visitors to Ocean City to access the seashore without having to drive. Similarly, an expansion of this service would allow seashore campers to more frequently visit commercial establishments in Ocean City and adjacent communities.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Assateague Island is a relatively active geological region, with the natural forces of wind and water continually reshaping the size of the island. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the State of Maryland are planning to widen the existing beaches along the northern end of the island by approximately 100 feet for a distance of approximately five miles to offset the effects of sand loss during recent ocean storms. This initial replacement of approximately 1.8 million cubic yards of sand will be annually replenished with approximately 189,000 cubic yards of sand.

The island is home to nearly 300 species of birds, and is a well known bird watching venue. The majority of these are found on the Virginia portion (the Chincoteague NWR) of the island. In addition, the piping plover, a threatened species, nests at Assateague Island. Two herds of wild horses known as “Assateague Ponies” make their home on Assateague Island. The herds are separated by a fence at the boundary between Maryland and Virginia. The herd on the Maryland side of the island is managed by the NPS. These animals are commonly observed around the roads and campgrounds. Preservation of the island in its natural state to as great a degree as possible is thus a major objective of the NPS.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The recreational activities on the seashore range from swimming and surf fishing to hiking, bicycling, canoeing and boating, and camping. Clamming, crabbing, and shell collecting are also popular. Limited hunting is also allowed on both the National Seashore and the NWR during limited periods of the year.

The combined limitations on oversand vehicle use, reservation use only campgrounds and day use parking serve to control the levels of observed visitation to what are deemed acceptable levels.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The existing General Management Plan (GMP) for the National Seashore is in the process of being updated. A major element of this update process is a better definition of the role that sustainable development, including the use of alternative fuels for park vehicles can have on the operation of the seashore.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The National Seashore has an ongoing planning process with both the USFWS (for the Chincoteague NWR) and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (for state park area). In addition, ongoing coordination takes place with representatives of the gateway communities on areas of common concern. For example, the NPS has commented on the location, design and visibility of private developments located within the viewshed of the bay side of the island and the Barrier Island Visitor Center.

Additionally, the NPS has coordinated with the Maryland State Highway Administration of the Maryland Department of Transportation (DOT) with regard to improving safety for bicyclists and pedestrians using Route 611 to access the seashore.

All of these efforts appear to be well received and respected by the effected agencies.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

ATS appear to have a moderate potential to increase usage of the National Seashore and enhance the experience of those who visit the site. For the most part, any such services would build upon the existing transit services in the area.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

- An expansion of the existing express bus service linking the National Seashore and State Park campgrounds with the Ocean City Transit Center/Bus Terminal. The current service level of three round-trips per day could be increased both in terms of duration of the service day and frequency. For example, departures from the National Seashore could be offered later than 5:00 p.m. and service frequency could be improved from the current once every two hours to once every hour. In addition, an expanded public information program to make Seashore visitors, especially overnight campers, aware of the existence of this service appears to be needed.
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■ 6.0 Bibliography

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■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Hal Atkins, Director of Public Works, Town of Ocean City

John Burns, Chief Ranger, Assateague National Seashore

Marc Koenings, Superintendent, Assateague National Seashore

Gregory Parker, Manager, Worcester County (Maryland) Ride Program

William Simmons, Manager, Assateague State Park, Maryland Department of Natural Resources

Maria Taylor, Chief Administrative Officer, Delaware Transit Corporation, Delaware Department of Transportation

Denise Winslow, Transit Planner, Maryland Mass Transit Administration, Maryland Department of Transportation